

An American Passion Play Weird and Barbarous

By HENRY G. TINSLEY

THE Americans, who count themselves fortunate in having seen the passion play at any of its performances once in ten years at Oberammergau, probably do not know that there takes place annually in their own country—during the last week of the Lenten season and within 350 miles of Denver—a passion play so frightfully fierce that the sacred drama of the German peasants is simple child's play in comparison.

Among the Raton and Sandia mountains (a southern spur of the great Rocky range) in northern New Mexico, American citizens are these very days slashing their flesh, shedding their lifeblood, stoically enduring excruciating agonies, all because they believe these torturous barbarities absolve them from past sins and some future ones.

These fanatics number some 700. They are known throughout New Mexico as the Penitentes—the full name being Los Hermanos Penitentes (the penitent brotherhood). In former years there were several thousand Penitentes, and their annual passion play was so savagely realistic that deaths of performers occurred almost every year.

When Gen. Lew Wallace was governor of New Mexico, in 1878 and 1881, he brought the attention of the government to the practices of the Penitentes. Charles F. Lummis, a litterateur of California, secretly photographed from a distance a party of Penitentes at San Mateo in 1898, while they were hanging a brother on a cross, and later Mr. Lummis was shot by an assassin in the locality. It had become known to the brotherhood that the former had made the pictures and that he purposed using them in a book.

The Penitentes are of Mexican origin, many having a marked strain of Indian blood. They are densely ignorant; very few can read English, and not many can read Spanish. Scarcely one in ten has ever been 100 miles away from the isolated settlements among the rugged and barren mountains. They are no more in sympathy with American spirit than if they lived in the heart of Africa. Their region is a bit of the

and trackless desert wastes, were nailing their brothers to crosses and cutting pieces from one another's flesh for absolution from past and future sins.

The building of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad through New Mexico in 1882 was a death knell to the order. The coming of troops of tourists with curious eyes, and the influx of Yankee cattlemen, gold miners, business men and farmers, have gradually diminished the ranks of the order and somewhat ameliorated the savagery as a means of grace.

The Roman Catholic church for twelve years has striven bravely and energetically toward stopping the practices of the order. Father Brun, who defiantly labored at San Mateo to disrupt the order, narrowly escaped assassination several times. The sight-seer, who would now witness the passion play of Holy Week among the Penitentes, must go off the beaten paths of travel to the rude mud and stone-built hamlets of Taos, San Mateo, Cubero, Tejuque, and travel over grim, lonely and hard mountain roads. Even when he gets to the region of the Penitentes he must be cautious in his effort to look upon any of the rites of the brotherhood. Woe be to the person who might be caught following a band of Penitentes, or listening to their councils. Charles F. Lummis says that traitors to the order have been buried alive.

Nowadays Taos (the home and burial place of Kit Carson) is the stronghold of the Penitentes. It is hidden away in the mountains seventy-five miles from the railroad, and is substantially the same community it was two centuries ago. The old adobe church of Fernandez de Taos was for several generations the headquarters for several thousand Penitentes. Father Brun finally stopped such sacrilege in the church when he went to Taos in 1875, and after he had a persistent and dangerous battle with fanaticism. To this day one may see beneath many coats of whitewash the dark splashes on the interior church walls, reminiscent of the days when men slashed their flesh during some 200 Lenten seasons. When Father Brun went there the inner walls were black to his shoulder with stains.

With the advent of Ash Wednesday the fanatics of the order come from the mountain settlements and gather secretly at the morada. In each group or circle of Penitentes there is the Hermano Mayor (chief brother), whose authority is supreme. In old days he condemned to death heretics who opposed the holy order, and his will was executed in divers secret ways. Every one of the forty Lenten days is observed by the fanatics of the order. The members live at the morada, sleeping on the earthen floor. There are semi-weekly flagellations—the more fanatical demanding extra scourgings now and then. Once every three days each member of the order grapples one of the huge, heavy crosses, made of tree

trunks, almost as large as a telegraph pole in girth, and, with it across his naked shoulders, starts dragging it to the campo santo (Calvary) and back—probably half a mile of travel in all. The purpose is to make the Penitente humble and to better appreciate the sufferings of the Master on the true Calvary.

But when the last six days of Lent or Holy Week come, the Penitentes redouble their efforts to square their religious accounts for the year by a fanatical stoicism, probably unknown elsewhere except among the East Indian fakirs. At dawn every day in Holy Week the Penitentes give themselves scourgings that would terrify one who had never seen them. Cat-o'-nine-tail whips made of braided tough yucca baccata are used. Every blow raises a welt under each of the lashes. Over one shoulder and then over the other, the Penitente beats the yucca branch with all the strength of his muscular arms. Then he scourges his lower back. Sometimes he even asks a brother to lay the lashes on. Backs as raw as beefsteak are common. There are generally some veteran Penitentes, whose wild fanaticism finds the scourgings unsatisfactory. They bind for a few hours at a time clumps of buckthorn cactus to their bare shoulders so tight that the thorns sink deeply into the raw flesh. It is wonderful that human beings can endure such pain and bloodshedding for a week. Fortunately for themselves the Penitentes are generally stalwart vaqueros.

Every day, too, each of the Penitentes staggers under the weight of one of the crosses from the morada up the grade to campo santo. There the Penitente kneels, utters a Spanish prayer, and staggers back to the morada. B. M. Edwards, of Santa Fe, says he has seen Penitentes, with backs a mass of quivering flesh, shoulder a cross and haul it twice in one day from the morada to campo santo and back.

The crowning event occurs on Good Friday, when the anniversary of Christ's death is celebrated with

THIS tells how the Penitentes of New Mexico inflict awful barbarities upon themselves during the Lenten season. These American citizens are placed upon crosses, slashed with knives and agonized with cactus thorns.

a drama of the crucifixion. Honorary members of the order of Penitentes, known as Hermanos de Luz (Brothers of Light) are called in then to assist in the passion play. These Brothers of Light are aged and feeble veterans of the Penitentes. One of them is dressed with a tinsel crown on his swart head, to represent what he very crudely thinks is Pontius Pilate; another wears white cotton robes and long whiskers to represent Peter, and still another young Penitente is dressed in feminine garb to represent Mary, the mother of Christ.

The annual renewing of the seal of the order occurs at dawn on Good Friday. All Penitentes—neophytes and veterans—must be present at this ceremony. The Penitentes stand within the morada in single rows, with bodies nude above their overalls. The Hermano Mayor speaks in Spanish upon the order and its zeal. Then he utters a written prayer that has come to him from many predecessors. At a signal each Penitente in the lines raises his right arm above his head. The Hermano Mayor, with an historic piece of sharp flint in his hand, moves down the line and gives each person the seal of the order, consisting literally of three slashes of the flesh, each several inches long, across the right chest.

At about 4 o'clock on Good Friday the crucifixion ceremonies begin. The Penitentes issue from their morada and silently form in procession, two abreast. The pitero and the Hermano Mayor take their places at the head of the procession. The pitero blows weirdly shrill notes on his musical pipe, and the brothers go shambling slowly to campo santo. They are bare as to chests and backs, and are hatless and shoeless. Every back in the procession is a mass of reddened welts and lacerations.

The man who has been chosen the Christ staggers pitifully at the rear under a crushing weight of a heavy cross of oak timbers. But he is performing a part that he has sought for these many months. He is loosely wrapped about the loins with a cotton fabric, as the Nazarene is always pictured on Calvary. About his forehead is bound a wreath of buckthorn cactus, pressed deep into the flesh. His broad back is a mass of angry flesh. How one in his physical condition can endure such pain and bear up such a load with his bare shoulders, is only explainable on the grounds of insane fanaticism that sometimes gives extraordinary prowess.

Bound to the Cross

ARRIVED at the little hill chosen as the Calvary, the Penitentes circle about a shallow excavation. The pitero ceases his strange air. The Hermano Mayor gives a sign, and a half dozen young men seize the perspiring, panting wretch, who comes staggering up the hillside with his mammoth cross across his shoulders. The man is thrown on the cross, and several muscular arms bind his limp form there with cords of cowhide. If he has his senses and is very devout, it is proper for him to exclaim in the jargon of this region:

"Bind me not! Nail me, nail me to the cross."

In former years the suppliant was taken literally at his word.

When the man has been bound as tight as the vaqueros know how, the crown of cactus thorns is pressed closer upon his bleeding brow, the cross is lifted and then allowed to drop with a thud into the excavation. A shiver of pain goes through the creature on the cross. He may groan slightly but he never speaks. His family and relatives would reproach him the rest of his days for such a breach.

The Penitentes stand and look up at the man. One cannot adequately tell the weirdness of the crucifixion scenes among the southern valleys of the Rocky Mountains. The picture of an apparently lifeless man hanging from a rude cross, surrounded by half-naked, dark-visaged, rough and bewhiskered men, in the shadows of a departing day, would never fade from anyone's memory. But the reverential silence of the assemblage, the brown backs reddened, the barren solitude of the locality, and the lonely grandeur of the everlasting mountains all about, add qualities to the scene that are known nowhere else in all the world. Hardened as the spectators in these lonely valleys are to these annual crucifixions, an intense hush comes over them and everyone gazes in awe at the central figure raised aloft on the cross. The person from a civilized community who looks upon a scene like this for the first time, feels the blood pounding in his ears.

A crucifixion may last half an hour. The cowhide cords bound about the victim by the Mexican cowboys cut deep into the flesh. The man looks as if he were dying. His flesh becomes dark, then purple and black. His head droops forward and generally he swoons. In former days when the victims were actually spiked to the cross there were frequent deaths of Penitentes on the cross. The last authentic case of crucifixion by nailing took place in San Mateo in 1887.

At a signal from the Hermano Mayor, the cross is lifted from the excavation and is lowered. A sheet is thrown over the limp and unconscious man on the cross. The cords are loosed and a half-dozen brothers pick up the body and carry it to the morada. There it is nursed back to life. Sometimes it requires a day or two. But whatever the agony, and no matter how near the man has been to death, he has brought glory on his family for many a long year, and at the dance on Easter Monday he is the biggest man in the locality.



Home of the Hermano Mayor of the Penitentes at San Mateo, N. M.

Middle Ages dropped down in America. This barbarous order of Penitentes flourishes within a day's wagon ride from Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico. The squat adobe houses—the headquarters ("moradas")—of the brotherhood are at Taos, San Mateo, Tejuque and Santa Maria. The people in this region live in mud and crude stone houses, as did their ancestors 200 and 300 years ago. Their scanty subsistence is had from the little flocks of sheep and the bunches of cattle on the mountain sides round about. A few of the Penitentes mine at will for gold and silver in a slipshod way characteristic of the life of everyone in the region. A man there who can get even \$600 from the sale of all his worldly goods is a local Dives.

Founded in Spain in 1508

THE order of Penitentes had its origin in the strange spirit of asceticism by flagellation and self-inflicted physical agonies as a means of grace, which overran Europe in the early part of the sixteenth century. The order was founded in Spain at about 1508, and was brought to Mexico by the Conquistadores under Cortez. The Conquistadores, who had followed in the wake of Coronado, in 1545, brought from the City of Mexico the doctrine of serving the Master by suffering bodily pain and mortification of the flesh. In the isolation of the Spanish pioneers among the Indians of the New World, hundreds of miles from any refining influences, the stern asceticism took quick and deep root. As years passed the Penitentes multiplied. Their doctrine of flagellation and doing penance by physical agonies grew fiercer, and the followers of the cross among the Mexicans and Indians strove to outdo one another in stoical penances. While the American colonists were fighting at Bunker Hill and Yorktown, some 2,000 Penitentes out in New Mexico, cut off from all the world by vast mountains